


Nation & World
The Seattle Times

Inside the interrogation of a 9/11 mastermind

Originally published June 23, 2008 at 12:00 am



 **1 of 2** | A detainee is escorted to an interrogation room at the Camp Delta detention facility at the U.S. Marine Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in 2004. By the time all... **More** ✓

In a makeshift prison in northern Poland, al-Qaida's engineer of mass murder faced his CIA interrogator. It was 18 months after the Sept...

By [Scott Shane](#)

WASHINGTON — In a makeshift prison in northern Poland, al-Qaida's engineer of mass murder faced his CIA interrogator. It was 18 months after the Sept. 11 attacks, and the invasion of Iraq was giving Muslim extremists new motives for havoc. If anyone knew about the next plot, it was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

The interrogator, Deuce Martinez, a soft-spoken analyst who spoke no Arabic, had turned down a CIA offer to be trained in waterboarding.

He came in after the rough stuff, the ultimate good cop with the classic skills: an unimposing presence, inexhaustible patience and a willingness to listen to the gripes and musings of a pitiless killer in rambling, imperfect English. He achieved a rapport with Mohammed that astonished his fellow CIA officers.

A canny opponent, Mohammed mixed disinformation and braggadocio with details of plots, past and planned. Eventually, he grew loquacious. “They’d have long talks about religion,” comparing notes on Islam and Martinez’s Catholicism, one CIA officer recalled. And, the officer added, there was one other detail no one could have predicted: “He wrote poems to Deuce’s wife.”

Martinez, who by then had interrogated at least three other high-level prisoners, would bring Mohammed snacks, usually dates. He would listen to Mohammed’s despair over the likelihood that he would never see his children again and to his catalog of complaints about his accommodations.

“He wanted a view,” the CIA officer recalled.

The story of Martinez’s role in the CIA’s interrogation program, including his contribution to the first capture of a major figure in al-Qaida, provides the closest look to date beneath the blanket of secrecy that hides the program from terrorists and from critics who accuse the agency of torture.

Beyond the interrogator’s successes, this account includes new details on the campaign against al-Qaida, including the text message that led to Mohammed’s capture, the reason the CIA believed his claim that he had killed Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, and the separate teams at the CIA’s secret prisons — those who meted out the agony and those who asked the questions.

In the Hollywood cliché of Fox’s “24,” a torturer shouts questions at a bound terrorist while inflicting excruciating pain. The CIA program worked differently. A paramilitary team put on the pressure, using cold temperatures, sleeplessness, pain and fear to force a prisoner to talk. When the prisoner signaled assent, the tormentors stepped aside. After a break that could be a day or even longer, Martinez or another interrogator took up the questioning.

Martinez’s success at building a rapport with the most ruthless of terrorists goes to the heart of the interrogation debate. Did it suggest traditional methods alone might

have obtained the same information or more? Or did Mohammed talk so expansively because he feared more of the brutal treatment he already had endured?

A definitive answer is unlikely under the Bush administration, which has insisted in court that not a single page of 7,000 documents on the program can be made public. The CIA declined to provide information for this article, in part, a spokesman said, because the agency did not want to interfere with the military trials planned for Mohammed and four other al-Qaida suspects at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The two dozen current and former U.S. and foreign intelligence officials interviewed for this article offered a tantalizing but incomplete description of the CIA detention program. Most would speak of the highly classified program only on the condition of anonymity.

Martinez declined to be interviewed; his role was described by colleagues.

No body of experience

That Martinez, a career narcotics analyst who did not speak the terrorists' native languages and had no interrogation experience, would end up as a crucial player captures the ad-hoc nature of the program. Officials acknowledge it was cobbled together under enormous pressure in 2002 by an agency nearly devoid of expertise in detention and interrogation.

"I asked, 'What are we going to do with these guys when we get them?'" recalled A.B. Krongard, the No. 3 official at the CIA from March 2001 until 2004. "I said, 'We've never run a prison. We don't have the languages. We don't have the interrogators.'" "

In its scramble, the agency made the momentous decision to use harsh methods the United States had long condemned.

It located its overseas jails based largely on which foreign intelligence officials were most accommodating, and rushed to move the prisoners when word of locations leaked. Seeking a longer-term solution, the CIA spent millions to build a high-security prison in a remote desert location, according to two former intelligence officials. The prison, whose existence has never been disclosed, was completed — and then apparently abandoned unused — when President Bush decided in 2006 to move all the prisoners to Guantánamo.

By then, either a fear of waterboarding, the patient trust-building mastered by Martinez or the demoralizing effects of isolation, Mohammed and some other prisoners had become quite compliant. In fact, according to several officials, they

had become a sort of terrorist focus group, advising their captors on their fellow extremists' goals, ideology and tradecraft.

Asked, for example, how he would smuggle explosives into the United States, Mohammed told CIA officers that he might send a shipping container from Japan loaded with personal computers, half of them packed with bomb materials, according to a foreign official briefed on the episode.

"It was to understand the mind of a terrorist — how a terrorist would do certain things," the foreign official said of the discussions of hypothetical attacks. Thus did the architect of Sept. 11 become, in effect, a counterterrorism adviser to the U.S. government he professed to despise.

Martinez originally worked in the agency's Counternarcotics Center, where he learned to sift masses of phone numbers, travel records, credit-card transactions and more to search for people. His tool was the computer, and until Sept. 11 his expertise was drug cartels, not terrorist networks.

After the attacks, Martinez became a "targeting officer" in the hunt for al-Qaida.

Inside a "black site"

It was at a "black site" — a facility the agency used for interrogation of major al-Qaida figures — in Thailand that Martinez first tried his hand at interrogation on Abu Zubaydah, who refused to speak Arabic with his captors but spoke passable English. It was also there, as previously reported, that the CIA would first try physical pressure to obtain information, including the near-drowning of waterboarding.

Senior FBI officials thought such methods unnecessary and unwise. Their agents got Abu Zubaydah talking without the use of force, and he revealed the central role of Mohammed in the Sept. 11 plot. They correctly predicted that harsh methods would darken the reputation of the United States and complicate future prosecutions.

Some CIA officers were torn, though, believing the harsh treatment could be effective.

John Kiriakou, a former CIA counterterrorism officer who was the first to question Abu Zubaydah, expressed such conflicted views when he spoke publicly late last year. He was not present for the waterboarding but read the resulting intelligence reports and said he had been told Abu Zubaydah became compliant after 35 seconds of the water treatment.

“It was like flipping a switch,” Kiriakou said of the shift from resistance to cooperation. He said he thought such “desperate measures” were justified in the “desperate time” in 2002 when another attack seemed imminent. But on reflection, he said, he had concluded that waterboarding was torture and should not be permitted.

With Abu Zubaydah’s case, the pattern was set. With a new prisoner, the interrogators, like Martinez, would open the questioning. In about two-thirds of cases, CIA officials have said, no coercion was used.

If officers believed the prisoner was holding out, paramilitary officers who had undergone a crash course in the new techniques, but who generally knew little about al-Qaida, would move in to manhandle the prisoner. Aware they were on tenuous legal ground, agency officials insisted on approving each new step — a night without sleep, a session of waterboarding, even a “belly slap” — in an exchange of encrypted messages. A doctor or medic was always on hand.

The tough treatment would halt as soon as the prisoner expressed a desire to talk. Then the interrogator would be brought in.

Interrogation became Martinez’s new forte, first with Abu Zubaydah; then with Ramzi Binalshibh, the Yemeni who was said to have been an intermediary between the Sept. 11 hijackers and al-Qaida leaders, caught in September 2002; and then with Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the Saudi accused of planning the bombing of the U.S. destroyer Cole in 2000, who was caught in November 2002.

Binalshibh quickly cooperated; Nashiri resisted and was subjected to waterboarding, intelligence officials have said. CIA superiors offered Martinez and some other analysts the chance to be “certified” in what the CIA euphemistically called “enhanced interrogation methods.”

Martinez declined, as did several other CIA officers. He did not condemn the tough methods, colleagues said, but he was learning his talents lay elsewhere.

Another suspect is seized

Mohammed was captured on March 1, 2003, in Rawalpindi, near the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. It came down to a simple text message from an informant who had slipped into the bathroom of a house in Rawalpindi.

“I am with K.S.M.,” the message said, according to an intelligence officer briefed on the episode. A capture team took Mohammed into custody.

Within days, he was flown to Afghanistan and then on to Poland, where the most important of the CIA's black sites had been established. The secret base near Szymany Airport, 100 miles north of Warsaw, would become a second home to Martinez during the dozens of hours he spent with Mohammed.

The tough treatment began shortly after Mohammed was delivered to Poland. By several accounts, he proved especially resistant, chanting from the Quran, doling out innocuous information or offering obvious fabrications. It was reported last year that the intensity of his treatment — various harsh techniques, including waterboarding, used about 100 times over a period of two weeks — prompted worries that officers might have crossed the boundary into illegal torture.

Mohammed's cooperation came in fits and starts, and interrogators said they believed at times that he gave them disinformation. But he talked most freely to Martinez.

An obvious chasm separated these enemies, the interrogator and the prisoner. But Martinez shared a few attributes with his adversary that he could exploit as he sought the captive's secrets. They were close in age, approaching 40; they had attended public universities in the U.S. South (Mohammed had studied engineering at North Carolina A&T); they were both religious; they were both fathers.

Mohammed, according to one former CIA officer briefed on the sessions, "would go through these emotional cycles."

"He'd be chatty, almost friendly," the officer added. "He liked to debate."

He got to the stage where he'd draw parallels between Christianity and Islam and say, 'Can't we get along?' "

By this account, Martinez would reply to the man who had overseen the killing of nearly 3,000 people: "Isn't it a little late for that?"

At other times, the CIA officer said, Mohammed would grow depressed, complaining about being separated from his family and ranting about his cell or his food — a common theme for other prisoners.

Sometimes Mohammed wrote letters to the Red Cross or to President Bush with his demands; the letters went to CIA psychologists for analysis.

And there were the poetic tributes to Martinez's wife, scribbled in Mohammed's ungrammatical English and intended as a show of respect for his interrogator, according to a colleague who heard Martinez's account.

But as time passed, Mohammed provided more and more detail on al-Qaida's structure, its past plots and its aspirations. When he sometimes sought to mislead, interrogators often took his claims immediately to other al-Qaida prisoners at the Polish compound to verify the information.

Martinez told colleagues that Mohammed volunteered out of the blue that he was the man who beheaded Pearl, The Wall Street Journal reporter. The CIA at first was skeptical, according to two former agency officials. Intelligence analysts eventually were convinced, however, in part because Mohammed pointed out to Martinez details of the hand and arm of the masked killer in a videotape of the slaying that appeared to show it was him.

Divergent paths

On June 5, Mohammed made a theatrical return to the public eye at his Guantánamo Bay arraignment, with a long, graying beard and a defiant insistence that the U.S. military commission could do no more to him than give him his wish: execution and martyrdom.

His interrogator has moved on, too. Like many other CIA officers in the post-9/11 security boom, Martinez left the agency for more lucrative contract work.

His life today is quiet by comparison, but he has not turned away entirely from his old world. He now works for Mitchell & Jessen Associates, a consulting company run by former military psychologists who advised the CIA on the use of harsh tactics in the secret program.

And his new employer sent Martinez right back to the agency. For now, the unlikely interrogator of the man perhaps most responsible for the horrors of Sept. 11 teaches other CIA analysts the arcane art of tracking terrorists.

Scott Shane